

When They Aren't Healed

We all know God can work miracles. But how do we respond when someone with a chronic illness can't find His healing touch?

✖ What do we think when we encounter chronically ill people in our charismatic churches—godly, sincere believers who don't receive their healing despite years sometimes of pleading with God or examining themselves to find some fault that might be blocking their recovery?

Do we associate their unhealed illness with the weak faith they must possess? Do we view them dismissively, thinking hidden sin in their life surely is fueling their condition and that mere confession would restore physical wholeness?

These are relevant questions, since we all probably know chronically ill believers.

Consider this cross section of such Christians from the Pacific Northwest.

Bonnie Sanders. The Seattle resident was born with an extremely rare genetic defect that prevents her body from repairing skin damage caused by the sun's ultraviolet rays. For years, she attended a megachurch where the leaders stood firm that if one did not receive healing it was because of sin or lack of faith.

William Franks. During his sophomore year at the University of Washington, Franks fell into an inexplicable depression combined with racing, every-waking-moment abhorrent thoughts about himself. He was in continual torment. The mental illness—as it turned out to be—lasted 10 years despite the prayers of many.

Steve Hawthorne. Decades ago, Hawthorne unexpectedly suffered kidney failure. He kept up his ministry work amid almost daily

dialysis and weekly blood transfusions. Sixteen years ago—and four months after he and his wife, Juanita, opened their church in Puyallup, Washington—Juanita died of brain cancer, following weeks of pain and despite the prayers of her fellow church members.

How would you respond to believers such as these? Many charismatics would say: “Give them a dose of tough love. Tell them to get their walk with God and faith straightened out and healing will come.”

You might agree. And you might be right. Or wrong. But before you decide on the spiritual stability of these three souls, hear their stories.

Bonnie Sanders, 45

It was around Sanders’ 6th birthday that it became clear something was seriously wrong. She couldn’t be in the sun for more than a few minutes without her skin and eyes turning red. Coincidentally, it was the same year that a doctor developed a test to diagnose xeroderma pigmentosum, or XP, the extremely rare genetic defect young Sanders suffered from.

“XP is genetically recessive. Both the mother and the father have to carry the gene,” Sanders says, noting her parents later discovered they are distantly related—not a surprising occurrence in the tightly knit Dutch Reformed farming community of rural Iowa where they grew up.

Sanders had her first tumor removed at age 6. Since then, her life has been an unbelievable series of surgeries and heartaches. She estimates she’s had about 1,000 biopsies and more than 300 surgeries or reconstructions, mostly on her face and hands.

“I remember going to a research doctor when I was 6. My three siblings and I were lined up, and the doctor pointed to my younger brother and me and said, in our presence, ‘That one

and that one will die, but the other two will live.'"

Sanders' brother also has XP, but his case is much less severe.

Dutiful churchgoers, Sanders' parents took their children with them to church regularly until an incident in which a pastor told her father, "The reason your daughter has this problem is because of sin in your life."

"That was the last time my dad took us to church," Sanders says.

During high school years, her facial surgeries became more radical. In the 10th grade she lost the left side of her nose. The doctors used skin from behind her ear to reconstruct her nose. In college, she lost the right side of her nose, about a third of the bottom of both eyelids and part of her lower lip.

While pregnant with her second daughter, she was diagnosed with a bone tumor in her jaw. At week 26 of her pregnancy, she underwent a six-hour surgery and lost most of the right side of her jaw.

Because Sanders tries to stay out of both the sun and artificial ultraviolet light, none of the many skin grafts she has received on her face have changed color, so her face is a patchwork of different skin shades.

Sanders came to Christ in her junior year at the University of Washington. She has since then wrestled with why God didn't heal her, but now she says she's at peace.

"I have an incredible life, husband and family," Sanders says. "My challenges have made me a living testimony of the strength you can receive only through God. I'm living proof that there is hope for life after a death sentence from the medical field. I owe it all to God's grace and daily healing and the God-given skill of wonderful physicians."

William Franks, 47

As is often so with mental illness, it erupts in the late teen years, when Franks' did. "Looking back," he says, "I think my mental illness started in my early teens as a kind of paranoia. I had an unhappy childhood and was picked on mercilessly."

He was too ashamed of his strange, full-throttle thoughts to admit his agony to anyone. Two years after college and minutes before his wedding ceremony, Franks was in a room in the church, pacing back and forth and pounding his head to straighten out his racing dread. "I thought: OK, I'm getting married. I've got to get rid of this," he says.

On his honeymoon, Franks spiraled even further downward. He was immobilized by his pain and was suicidal. His new bride desperately searched the Yellow Pages of Kona, Hawaii, looking for help as Franks moaned on the hotel-room couch.

The nearby Foursquare pastor arrived, counseled Franks and prayed for the two of them to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Franks rose out of his suicidal stupor, but he was nowhere near healed.

For the next five years, he and his wife sought out all manner of Christian counselors for help. However, no one could stop his leaden depression and his racing thoughts.

It wasn't until a Jewish psychiatrist in Bellingham, Washington, suggested Franks consult with a peer of his at the nearby University of British Columbia that the doors of healing opened. The Canadian psychiatrist interviewed Franks for about 15 minutes and calmly said, "Well, it's clear you have obsessive-compulsive disorder."

He prescribed a medicine that quickly took away all his depression and agonizing thoughts. The drug was available only in Canada, so Franks had to make regular trips to British

Columbia to buy his medicine.

He firmly believes that depression and other mental disorders are often physiological problems—the result of inadequacies in four neurotransmitters in the brain, particularly serotonin. The mind and the brain are connected in such a way that a person's thought patterns can deplete serotonin levels, Franks believes. If a person has a genetic lack of serotonin, he will be unable to control his thoughts.

"All I know is that I was prayed for by dozens of sincere, godly believers. I regularly pleaded with God to take away my pain and to show me if there was any way I was blocking my healing," Franks says.

"But all I had to do was take a little pill, and all my problems were solved. Do I believe God still performs miracles? Absolutely. But, in my case, He worked through secular medicine."

Steve Hawthorne, 48

In 1983, Steve Hawthorne and his wife, Juanita—married just a year, idealistic and full of passion for the gospel—went to Fresno (California) State University to start a ministry. After about a year there, Hawthorne began to feel extremely fatigued.

At first he assumed it was the hot California August. But one morning while he was brushing his teeth, "huge hunks" of his tongue started coming off, he says.

When he took off his shirt, he found hundreds of water blisters on his torso. He didn't know it at the time, but both of these strange occurrences were signs that his kidneys had shut down and his body had filled with toxins.

The day after Hawthorne saw a physician, he and Juanita were packing for a hiking trip to Yosemite when the doctor called

and said Hawthorne must get to the hospital as quickly as possible. Soon—lying in a hospital bed, affixed to tubes and monitors—he was presented with the news that his kidneys had failed.

Upon his release, he went through dialysis three days a week and blood transfusions each week—yet tried to look at the bright side. It gave him an opportunity most people don't have. He could sit and study the Scriptures for long periods of time.

The young couple moved back to the Pacific Northwest. Soon after, his doctor called to say a matching set of kidneys had been found.

Hawthorne underwent a transplant, but in two years the kidneys failed. A rare disease had infected the organs before he received them.

The years went by, and the Hawthornes opened their Foursquare church in Puyallup, Washington. Four months later, Juanita was dead from brain cancer. Hawthorne was left to raise their two young children.

As time passed he underwent regular surgeries, often to repair the “access sites” for dialysis on his arms. He estimates he went through 20 surgeries and says he was close to death on the operating table more than once.

Despite this, Hawthorne kept on pastoring the church, eventually finding a peace. “I was content on dialysis,” he says. “I said, ‘Lord, thank you for life.’ I didn't even think of myself as sick.”

On May 16, 2003, Hawthorne got new kidneys. Several months later, he remarried. Both of his and Juanita's children—Josh, 21, and Stephanie, 19—are strongly following Christ. Today he pastors CrossPoint Foursquare Church in Puyallup.

Says Hawthorne: "I love Romans 15:13—'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'"

A Personal View of Suffering

So, did Sanders, Franks and Hawthorne miss their healing or have to wait years for it to come—and then by way of earthly medicine instead of a divine act—because they were blocking the Spirit's work through their sin or lack of faith?

They provide the answers.

"Halfway into my 10-year mental illness, my wife and I became very involved in the inner-healing ministry of Dennis and Rita Bennett," Franks says. "Dennis and Rita would point out that it's not in God's character to withhold healing from a suffering believer and that we can block God's healing in our lives through subconscious defects in our 'inner man,' our soul. I don't take offense with the idea that my faith or my walk may be lacking. That's why I need grace."

Franks even admits that because the medicine he takes to regulate the level of his brain's neurotransmitters brings him peace it could be exempting him from dealing with underlying emotional issues that wreak havoc with his brain chemistry.

"But, I've got to tell you, I've done the whole bit of trying to work on my problems as a crazy person," he says. "I'd much rather be able to, relatively speaking, ignore my underlying emotional issues and be sane."

Hawthorne refuses to blame his faith level or personal dedication to Christ for his illness. "We examined our hearts—'Is there anything in our lives, Lord, that we need to change or get rid of?' We were surrounded by committed Christians who loved us and prayed for us."

Sanders too says her illness didn't stem from a lack of faith

or dedication to Christ. "I know how I live my life," she says, "and so does God."

The three agree that the lack of miraculous healing in their lives is just evidence of God's desire to use their sickness for His glory.

"I know God's character," Sanders says. "He is not going to let me go through what I've gone through if it's not going to serve some higher purpose."

Says Franks: "I'm a firm believer that much of Christianity—of God's dealings with man—is shrouded in mystery. It's silly to think that you, a finite creature, could understand the mind of the infinite, uncreated God. Everything that is in the Bible is true. But not everything that is true is in the Bible. I don't think we can presume upon God."

Sanders, Franks and Hawthorne now see much good that has resulted from their chronic illnesses.

"I don't know all the answers, but I think there are two major reasons God didn't heal me," Hawthorne says. "One, He wanted to work in my character. Two, my illness connected me with so many people. If it took my kidneys failing for these people to make it into the kingdom, I'm OK with that."

So how should we view the chronically ill Christian? The people interviewed for this article said such people need our compassion and prayers.

"I would never look down on someone with a chronic illness," Franks says. "I know they want the illness gone more than anyone else [does]. I know they've tried everything they can. I know they're trying as hard as they can to listen for the voice of God."

"Don't push harsh judgments on them," Hawthorne encouraged. "They're doing everything they can spiritually to be healed."

Judgment doesn't do them any good."

Sanders believes the church should provide love and support and stand in prayerful agreement.

"Focus on the heart and fruit of the person's life, not the condition of the 'package' they live in," she says. "We have a responsibility to guard and care for the body, soul and spirit that God gave us. We also have a responsibility to live in line with God's teachings, believe for our complete healing, and to call on God to bind Satan's attempts to steal, kill and destroy.

"Ultimately, God's in charge of the manner and timing of the healing," Sanders says. "For some, this may not occur until they receive their new perfect body when they stand next to God. At that time, He will give us an account of our lives and His plan and we will have answers to the many mysteries of our lives."

John Draper is a writer in the Pacific Northwest and a member of the Charismatic Episcopal Church.